

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBO #4179/01 3242031
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 192031Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5653
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8509
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1342
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ NOV LIMA 6757
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 2691
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 7451

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 004179

CODEL
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/17/2018
TAGS: [ETRD](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [PHUM](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: CODEL MEEKS FOCUSES ON AFRO-COLOMBIAN ISSUES,
FUTURE OF BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

REF: BOGOTA 4066

Classified By: Ambassador William R. Brownfield for Reasons 1.4 (b & d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. Representative Gregory Meeks (D-NY) traveled to Bogota, Cali, and Guapi, Colombia November 6-10. During meetings with President Uribe and other public and private sector leaders, Congressman Meeks emphasized that the Obama administration would continue to embrace Colombia as a strategic partner. Representative Meeks participated in several meetings and events focused on advancing the interests of Afro-Colombian communities and reiterated the importance of the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement to the national interests of both countries. END SUMMARY

URIBE ADDRESSES DRUGS, HUMAN RIGHTS, FTA AND VENEZUELA

12. (C) During a 90-minute meeting, President Alvaro Uribe recounted his recent conversation with Senator Richard Lugar to Rep. Meeks and the Ambassador. Uribe said that Senator Lugar had expressed concerns about Colombia's rate of coca eradication. Uribe lamented that more sophisticated coca-measuring techniques gave the appearance of increased production when, in fact, they show that previous cultivation figures were understated. Nonetheless, Uribe acknowledged that much remains to be done in terms of eradication. Uribe also explained to Representative Meeks his new plan (reftel) to designate one person in each unit of the police and armed forces to receive human rights complaints from the community. Uribe plans to hold a weekly televised meeting with these individuals to make the GOC's handling of human rights complaints as transparent as possible. Uribe said he would invite the UN to participate in the process. In response to Representative Meeks' question, Uribe expressed confidence that the new Chief of the Army, General Oscar Gonzalez was an honest, dedicated professional.

13. (C) Congressman Meeks recommended that the GOC reach out discretely to members of President-elect Obama's transition team regarding the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Meeks noted that any lame duck session of Congress was likely to last only one week and be focused on the financial crisis and an economic stimulus package, making consideration of the FTA a long-shot at best. Uribe committed to sending letters to members of Congress and the transition team explaining the human rights-related events of the last few weeks and outlining the measures that Colombia has taken to deal with them. In response to Representative Meeks' questions about Venezuela, Uribe said that Colombia will continue to do its best to have normal relations with Chavez, despite the latter's insistence on "killing the private sector" and a total lack of cooperation in fighting terrorism and narcotics trafficking. Congressman Meeks inquired as to the basis by

which Uribe selected his new Army Commander, General Gonzalez. Uribe said he was selected for his operational capabilities; if there were concerns about him, he was willing to respond to them.

MEEKS RAISES PROFILE OF AFRO-COLOMBIAN COMMUNITIES

14. (SBU) Representative Meeks participated in an internal meeting, chaired by Vice President Francisco Santos, of the Intersectoral Commission on the Advancement of Afro-Colombians. During the meeting, academic experts outlined the challenges facing Afro-Colombians, including limited access to quality education and healthcare, few employment possibilities and sub-standard provision of public utilities and services. Leaders of Afro-Colombian communities outlined their concerns, including that foreign assistance is not reaching its intended beneficiaries, but rather is mostly going toward administrative costs.

15. (U) Congressman Meeks also accompanied Vice President Santos, Minister of Culture Paula Moreno, and the DCM to Guapi (Department of Cauca) to attend one of 15 Afro-Colombian community workshops held throughout Colombia that form part of the Commission's activities. At the workshop, Afro-Colombian community leaders discussed issues they face, ranging from lack of infrastructure and governability to structural discrimination and the need for greater dialogue between policymakers and the community. Vice President Santos asserted that the GOC's willingness to acknowledge discrimination and face it head on were at the

root of the Commission's formation and its outreach through the community workshops. Representative Meeks emphasized to the assembled members of the community in Guapi the USG's work to "make your children's tomorrow better than your today" and acknowledged the enthusiasm Afro-Colombians expressed toward Barack Obama's election. Congressman Meeks and Vice President Santos also used the occasion to sign a joint declaration recognizing a one million dollar USAID project, which will directly support over 800 coconut growers in the Guapi area.

AFRO-COLOMBIAN CIVIL SOCIETY: EDUCATION IS KEY

16. (SBU) Representative Meeks met with several civil society groups and students active in the Afro-Colombian community. Members of the Cali branch of the National Afro-Colombian Women's Network told Congressman Meeks of the hope and sense of empowerment they felt with the election of Barack Obama and of their plans to establish a leadership school for Afro-Colombian women. Members of the Association of Afro-Colombian Journalists expressed their frustration over the Colombian media's lack of focus on the plight of Afro-Colombians and welcomed Representative Meeks' offer to help put them in touch with the National Association of Black Journalists in the U.S. Finally, Congressman Meeks told groups of Afro-Colombian students in Cali and Bogota, including USG-supported Martin Luther King Fellows and Afro-Colombian Leadership Scholars, that Afro-Colombians' future depends on them. All of the groups agreed that the most vital issue to moving Afro-Colombian communities forward is access to quality education. Meeks told the groups of his plans to bring a group of U.S. civil rights leaders to Colombia in the coming months to focus greater attention on Afro-Colombians.

MEEKS STRESSES NEED FOR UNITED AFRO-COLOMBIAN VOICE

17. (SBU) In meetings with Afro-Colombian Congressional Caucus members, as well as the National Association of Mayors of Municipalities with Afro-Descendant Populations (Amunafro), Congressman Meeks emphasized the need to speak with one voice and not let the Afro-Colombian community be politically divided. He also stressed the importance of the two groups working together and in coordination with other groups, which

are focused on Afro-Colombian issues. Members of the Caucus outlined their concerns, including environmental degradation and a precarious security situation as narco-terrorists are pushed into areas with large Afro-Colombian populations. Several members of Amunafro pointed out the importance of the FTA for their communities' development, particularly as it might spur greater trade between Colombia's Pacific Coast and Asia. At the meeting, Representative Meeks and Minister of Culture Moreno signed a joint declaration recognizing USAID's commitment of 200,000 dollars to strengthen Amunafro.

WORKPLACE DIVERSITY ENSURES FTA BENEFITS ARE SHARED

¶8. (SBU) In meetings with business community leaders in Cali and Bogota, Representative Meeks underscored the importance of inclusive policies in the workplace and urged the business community to reach out to groups, such as the MLK Fellows Program, to recruit qualified Afro-Colombian, indigenous and women for jobs. Congressman Meeks pointed out that workplace diversity policies would help ensure the benefits of the FTA reach traditionally marginalized sectors of the population. In response to questions about the chances the FTA would come up in a lame duck session, he acknowledged that human rights concerns surrounding the Soacha case may complicate the timing of the FTA, but stressed the importance of the FTA to both countries' national interests.

MEEKS SEES BUENAVENTURA HOUSING PROJECT AS EXAMPLE

¶9. (U) Vice Minister of Environment, Housing and Development Luis Felipe Henao presented the details of a USAID-supported GOC project to build houses on a 550-acre tract of land in Buenaventura. Once built the houses would be available for the relocation of Afro-Colombian communities in Buenaventura that currently live in low-lying areas prone to flooding and absent basic public services and education for residents. Representative Meeks noted the importance of this project's

success, since it could serve as an example for similar ones in other communities.

MEEKS RECEIVES POSITIVE MEDIA COVERAGE

¶10. (U) Representative Meeks' visit to Colombia, coming on the heels of the election of Barack Obama, generated interest in both broadcast and print media. In each of his engagements with the media, Representative Meeks emphasized that the FTA was a question of "when" not "if." In an effort to assuage concerns on the ground, Representative Meeks also communicated that the Obama administration would "not turn its back on Colombia." "El Tiempo" (Colombia's largest and most influential daily, centrist, circ. 1,198,000 / Sunday 2,247,300) reported on the Representative's trip to Guapi with Vice President Santos, specifically the signing ceremony recognizing the USAID commercialization project for coconut produced by Afro-Colombians in the region. Representative Meeks did two live radio interviews on Monday, November 10 with La FM Radio (100,000 listeners) and Caracol Radio (largest radio network, 765,100 listeners), in which he countered Colombian former President Andres Pastrana's accusation that the Uribe administration has done a poor job of reaching out to congressional Democrats. An exclusive interview with Representative Meeks is scheduled to appear in Cambio magazine (centrist weekly, circ. 183,000) on Thursday, November 27.

¶11. (U) Representative Meeks' staff did not/not have the opportunity to clear this cable.

BROWNFIELD